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STATE FOR SCA/INS, USPACOM FOR FPA

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SUBJECT: "NEW MALDIVES" MINISTERS WHO RESIGNED PREDICT  
ROCKY ROAD FOR REFORM PROCESS

REF: COLOMBO 1166

Classified By: Ambassador Robert O. Blake, Jr. for reasons  
1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary: At a private dinner on 8/29 hosted by Ambassador, the three leading "New Maldives" advocates for political reform, all of whom resigned from the government in recent days, candidly discussed the bleak outlook for political reform and the unsuccessful negotiations they had with President Gayoum to persuade him not to run for President in the elections expected in 2008. The three believe Gayoum's departure is the only way to usher out the old, corrupt guard around Gayoum and allow a new, younger, cleaner, and more reform-minded generation of leaders to take charge. They think the majority of the Cabinet and the country agree. They asserted that the MDP will not participate in the drafting of a new constitution out of pique with the Government's handling of the referendum process. With the MDP outside the process, it will be forced to take its campaign for reform into more public forums and demonstrations which will likely be met by more arrests, harassment, and even violence. The three former ministers plan to play an active role in encouraging reform, but have not yet decided whether to form a new party. They urged that the US and UK in particular remain engaged in encouraging democratic reform and implementation of the President's Road Map since there are now few advocates for change within the Government. They also asked that the international community suggest to the Maldivian Government that it request the UNDP in Male to arrange a UN assessment of what steps need to be taken to ensure free and fair elections and constructive participation by international observers. End Summary.

Gayoum Must Go  
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12. (C) Ambassador hosted dinner in Male on 8/29 for former Foreign Minister Ahmed Shaheed, former Attorney General Hassan Saeed, and former Justice Minister Mohamed Jameel (strictly protect all three throughout). The three are among the most progressive "New Maldives" politicians who had been pressing for political reforms. The three attributed their resignations to what they saw as backtracking by Gayoum on his earlier promises to them that he would not contest the

Presidential elections expected to be held at a time to be determined in 2008. In describing their informal negotiations with Gayoum that have been underway since the beginning of the year, the three noted their growing skepticism that Gayoum would relinquish power.

13. (C) But that pledge began to unravel quickly. Shaheed described a visit that he and Saeed arranged for the President to the southern atoll of Addu, an area where Shaheed, Saeed and the MDP enjoy substantial popular support and the President virtually none. Shaheed said that thanks to their extensive efforts to prepare the visit, good crowds turned out and treated the President respectfully. The President however, gained misplaced confidence from this visit and believed mistakenly he could gain support in the south which persuaded him to decide to run in 2008 after all.

At first, Shaheed said, the President told the three ministers he would run, serve for a year, and then resign. As the months ticked by, the President continued to lengthen the period in which he would serve before resigning. Then in early August he told Shaheed that he planned to serve for an entire five-year term if elected. At this point Shaheed informed the President of his intention to resign and of his conviction that the country needs a new generation of leaders, which can only happen if Gayoum leaves office.

14. (C) Shaheed confided that his decision to part publicly with the President was not easy after 10 years of working as one of his closest advisors. But he reiterated that Gayoum's departure was the only way to usher out the old, corrupt guard around Gayoum and allow a new, younger, cleaner, and more reform-minded generation of leaders to take charge. Shaheed and Saeed said that the majority of Gayoum's cabinet agree that Gayoum must go and predicted that if elections

were held only a handful of Ministers and the President's immediate family would campaign for him. The three also believe that the country wants a change. They said that Gayoum can only count on the support of the atolls in the north if he were to run. He would likely lose the vote in urban areas, particularly in Male, as well as most of the southern atolls.

#### Prospects for Reform Program

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15. (C) The three former ministers predicted that the political reform program faces a rocky road in the months to come. They explained that political reform enjoys little support within the cabinet now that the three of them have resigned. They confirmed rumors that Information Minister Nasheed will likely be given the additional responsibility of overseeing the reform program. They cautioned however, that Nasheed is not considered a reform advocate. They noted that the Defense Minister, Construction Minister, and one or two other ministers support political change, but none of them will have line responsibility for the political and legal reforms under consideration.

#### Old Faces, New Bottles, Same Old Wine

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16. (C) They evinced equal skepticism about some of the new faces now taking influential positions. The new Foreign Minister for example, worked for many years in the Presidential Secretariat, where he was repeatedly accused of corrupt practices and finally demoted by Gayoum to be Deputy Foreign Minister. His promotion after Shaheed's departure reflected the few alternatives available to President. The Ambassador inquired about the future of former Ambassador to the UN and US Latheef. The three explained that Latheef had been accused of corruption during his tenure as Minister of Education and was sent to the UN before the charges became a political liability for Gayoum. Shaheed indicated that Latheef was slated to assume charge of the Civil Service Commission, which will give him control of the country's 40,000 civil servants and significant patronage opportunities. Latheef reportedly remains close to President

Gayoum's half brother Yameen.

#### Grim Outlook for MDP

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17. (C) The three former ministers predicted that relations between the government and the MDP are likely to sour further. The MDP reportedly has already informed the government that they will not participate in the negotiations to draft a new constitution, because of their deep unhappiness at what they see as the government's heavy-handed manipulation of the recent referendum (septel). The Ambassador told Shaheed that he had urged the MDP to participate in the drafting of the new constitution because otherwise there would be no one inside the drafting process with a true commitment towards political reform. Shaheed and the others agreed the MDP should participate. He said that while there probably were irregularities, they did not affect the referendum outcome and the MDP should be proud of the tally they received. He predicted that with the MDP outside the process they would be forced to take their campaign for reform into more public forums and demonstrations which would likely be met by more arrests, harassment, and even violence.

#### New Coalition for Reform?

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18. (C) Asked what role they intended to play to help the reform process, the three former ministers said they plan to play an active role, but have not yet decided whether to form a new party. They indicated that they would establish their own private law firm this week so that they could earn some income. They also spoke of their plans to form a coalition of reform-minded members of parliament composed of centrists from the government DRP party, the opposition MDP and other parties. Shaheed thought it would be necessary to establish

a party at some point, but said they would wait to do so until they had canvassed potential support for their centrist coalition. Shaheed also indicated that he and his colleagues plan to use Shaheed's Open Society Institute as a platform for public debate on the need for democratic change. Ambassador noted that the US plans to host a series of events as part of US-Maldives friendship week in early November. He suggested that the US Embassy arrange for a US expert on elections and democratic processes to speak, perhaps by DVC, after which Shaheed, the Ambassador, and perhaps representatives of other political parties could lead a public discussion. All three former ministers enthusiastically endorsed the idea.

#### Next Steps for the International Community

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19. (C) Asked what role the US and other concerned countries could play to help promote democratic reform, Shaheed and his colleagues responded that it would be critical for the US and UK in particular to remain actively engaged since the US and UK enjoy good relations and access to all of the key players.

The Ambassador suggested that he organize a meeting in Colombo for the three with Ambassador Chilcott, the EU head of Mission and perhaps one or two others the week of September 3rd so the three former ministers could explain the situation to colleagues in Sri Lanka and chart a common agenda for consideration by capitals. The three former ministers agreed this would be useful. Beyond that, Shaheed suggested that the international community press Gayoum fully to implement his own Road Map for political reform since most of the key bills for that road map have already been introduced. Shaheed also asked that the international community suggest to the Maldivian Government that it request the UNDP in Male to arrange a UN assessment of what steps need to be taken to ensure free and fair elections and constructive participation by international observers. Shaheed said that UN Resident Representative in Male Coeur-Bizot had already had informal talks with the government about this and Gayoum reportedly is amenable to the idea, but has not yet made the request.

Comment

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¶10. (C) The departure of these three reformers from the Cabinet marks the beginning of what is likely to be a more difficult road ahead for political reform. Their public break with Gayoum underlined their loss of hope that he would be willing to step down and allow them and the next generation of leaders they represent to take charge. They are not naive about the challenges they and the opposition will face to sweep aside the older, corrupt generation. But they are confident that the majority of the country will support change. Ironically, Shaheed joined the President in campaigning in favor of the Presidential system of government before the recent referendum because he and his colleagues believe that free and fair elections are the best hope for removing Gayoum who has been in power for almost 30 years. The US and others must play a leading role in encouraging Gayoum to proceed with his own roadmap and work with the UN and others to lay the basis for the country's first truly free and fair Presidential elections ever. Embassy will report more after our planned follow-up meetings next week in Colombo.

BLAKE